

Both *Shahid* and *Shaheed*, Witness and Martyr: A Study of Agha Shahid Ali's *The Country Without a Post Office*

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Abstract: Agha Shahid Ali was born in New Delhi, India, on February 4, 1949 he grew up in Kashmir, returned Delhi to complete his M.A in the Delhi University. He authored several collections of poetry, including *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001), *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997), *The Beloved Witness: Selected poems* (1992), *A Nostalgist's Map Of America* (1991), *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* (1987), *The Half Inch Himalyaas* (1987), *In Memory to Begum Akhter and Other poems* (1979), *Bone and Sculpture* (1972). He was the author of T.S Eliot as editor (1986), translator of The Rebel's Silhouette: selected poems by Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1992) and editor of revisiting disunities: real Ghazal in English (2000). Shahid is known particularly for his dexterous allusions to European, Urdu, Arabic and Persian literary traditions, his poetry collections revolve around both thematic and cultural poles. *The Country Without a Post Office* which is under consideration in this paper is a look on Kashmir both topical and metaphysical and in equal parts auto- biography, current history and poetry. The very title of the volume, *The Country Without a Post Office* is suggestive of the complete and all-pervasive sense of loss, anger with a delicate political undertone of protest against his physical separation from the imagined homeland juxtaposed with the colonization of the land. As the Post office symbolizes a particular address and an identity of a specific person who lives in a country but here for Shahid once the absence of it means an eclipse of his existence from the world, such a situation becomes unbearable for the poet and therefore laments his despair throughout the narratives of the poem.

Agha Shahid Ali, a Kashmiri American poet better known as the chronicler of pain, suffering, and constant oppression inflicted on the people of Himalayan state of Indian administered Kashmir since the armed rebellion begins in the 1990's. The "blood dimmed tide" submerged the whole valley into the perennial blood bath and trauma after the alleged rigged election of 1987 ripped apart the peace and political stability forever in the state. Ali was born in New Delhi, India in 1949 but he grew up in Kashmir, the son of a distinguished and highly educated family in Srinagar. He migrated to U.S. for higher studies and is known and identified there as an American poet writing in English. The recipient of

numerous fellowships and awards and a finalist for the National Book Award, he taught at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Princeton College and in the MFA program at Warren Wilson College. At the time of his death in 2001, Ali was noted as a poet uniquely able to blend multiple ethnic influences and ideas in both traditional forms and elegant free-verse. His poetry reflects his Hindu, Muslim, and Western heritages. In *Contemporary Poets*, critic Bruce King remarked that Ali's poetry swirls around insecurity and "obsessions [with]...memory, death, history, family ancestors, nostalgia for a past he never knew, dreams, Hindu ceremonies,

friendships, and self-consciousness about being a poet.”

His poetry is like a canvas on which he draws an imaginary painting of his homeland albeit bruised, besieged but its mesmerizing landscape and unique culture remains an alter ego for him. Shahid is like the other regional poets of the world who achieved prominence like the Derek Walcott of the Caribbean, Seamus Heaney of Ireland and the Mahmoud Darwish of the Palestine, whose poetry is surcharged with the political overtones of their homelands. The poems in *The Country Without a Post Office* were written in the background of the ongoing conflict and reflect the aspiration and the cultural ethos of Kashmir. Carol Muske writes:

Ali's voice possesses this contemporary agelessness. Ali grew up in Kashmir, a citizen of that small mountainous country torn apart by violence, its colonial past and present status as disputed territory between Pakistan and India. In this book of poems, *The Country Without a Post Office*, he mourned the devastation visited on his childhood home—once a paradise, offering the legendary jewel of Dal Lake near the ascent into the Himalayas, just a few hundred miles from China.

In *The Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie writes, “the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss (of migration) in an intensified form.” Similarly to Ali memory was like a continuous, waking dream. *The Country Without a Post Office* narrates a woeful tale and unabated sufferings of the people of Kashmir. In all the poems we see a series of heart wrenching pictures of the valley, women mourning, old and young without their veils, disheveled hair, gnawing at their cheeks and beating their chests raw. Men are shown as surrounding their beloved ones, with grief in their eyes and no sign of tears, no crying, no wailing but a kind of dormant

volcano swirling inside them. Further the beautiful meadows are fertilized by vast colonies identified with sepulchers or the unknown silenced by the bullets lie in the unmarked graves. This horrific and haunting volume establishes Agha Shahid Ali as a seminal voice of Kashmir writing in English. He brings into focus the suffering of generations inflicted by different oppressors time to time on the people of Kashmir till now when the upholding basic human rights, democracy, rule of law, freedom of speech characterize the modern world. In “A Prologue,” to *The Country Without a Post Office*, Shahid writes:

And will the blessed women rub the ashes together? Each fall they gather Chinar leaves, singing what the hills have re-echoed for four hundred years, the songs of Habba Khatoon, the peasant girl who later became the queen. When her husband was exiled from the valley by the Mughal king Akbar, she went among the people with her sorrow. Her grief, alive to this day, in her own roused the people into frenzied opposition to Mughal rule. And since Kashmir has never been free. (34-41)

The prologue takes us back to the time when the seeds of discord and destruction were sown after the Yusuf Shah Chak; a Kashmiri king was captured by the mighty Mughals and taken away to northern India, never to return again to his homeland. This unbearable separation turns Habba Khatoon, the queen of Kashmir, an ascetic but her songs which she sang in his memory and epic wait embedded with sorrows and pain earned her a title the nightingale of Kashmir. Thus the prologue covers all the way four hundred years of Kashmir history drenched in blood and tears. The metaphoric title of the book is much important in a sense that the Kashmir has not lost now but centuries back.

In *The Country Without a Post Office* Ali takes us to a world where the large scale agony, oppression, mass exodus of Pundits, curfews, torture, mass rapes, army camps and constant subjugation of the people was once termed "the blessed land" or "paradise on earth" into a beautiful jail. This wave of violence which shattered the peace of Kashmir was just treated as news consistently aired and published by the media but not heard and listened as a grave human issue by the world community so that to avoid the catastrophe and carnage in which the valley is still bleeding. It was this volume of Ali and his sudden outcry to reach out to the world and narrate the sordid tale of his homeland which the world has unfortunately forgotten. Because the 'all is well' notion manifested time to time by every non Kashmiri ruler displaying high handed tactics like brute force to quell the innate sentiment was the only way for them to perpetuate their authority against the wishes of native people. In the following lines a nautch-girl is shown pouring wine into the Emperor's glass as if nothing terrible has happened and people are moving from one generation to another.

In the marble summer palace

a nautch girl pours wine

into the Emperor's glass,

splintering the future

into wars of succession,

the leaves scattered

as the wind blows

an era into

another dynasty's bloody arms. ("From Son et Lumiere at Shalimar Garden," 28-36)

In the poem, "*I Dream I Am the Only Passenger on Flight 423 to Srinagar*" where we see the fusion of political and spirituality is the main motif of poem. Sitting in the plane Ali takes a bird's view

but to his surprise he is unable to decide whether he is watching the beautiful autumn leaves burning or the burning of the famous shrine of Sheikh Noor Deen Noorani (ra) at Charar-e-Sharif situated in the central Kashmir. Therefore *The Country Without a Post Office* is three in one essentially poetry, partly autobiography, partly history. Prof. Syed Habib Feels:

The electric lights are turned off and the country without office, crying from pain, flickers under kerosene lamps. Dreams, sometimes motionless like the dead, sometimes moving like the army conveys over the mountains, corresponds with Ali and his readers- listeners and the sanctuary of his heart is adorned with the red wine of Ali's penmanship.

There is a poem *I See Kashmir From New Delhi at Midnight* which is divided into four sections. The first section deals with a curfew night where a boy, naked and tortured, screams: "I know nothing." The unidentified boy becomes particular, Rizwan, in the second section of the poem, where he dies in front of the poet. In the third section Kashmiri mothers grieve over the dead and mourners walk by:

.... From windows we hear

grieving mothers, and snow begins to fall

on us, like ash. Black on edges of flames,

it cannot extinguish the neighbourhoods,

the homes set ablaze by midnight soldiers.

Kashmir is burning... (11)

The first three sections of the poem project the images of "a burning tyre," "a naked boy is screaming," "emptied Srinagar," "a gathering of mourners," "a funeral," "burning homes," and "flames." The central character Rizwan is tortured in an army camp; and after being shot and wounded, he runs away. Rizwan represents

several others who have witnessed the terror and became victims of the torture: "...I follow him through blood on the road / and hundreds of pairs of shoes the mourners / left behind, as they ran from the funeral, / victims of firing..." (11). The poet finds the dying victim and the description follows:

'Rizwan, it's you, Rizwan, it's you,' I cry out

As he steps closer, the sleeves of his phirentorn.

'Each night put Kashmir in your dreams,' he says,

Then touches me...

Whispers, 'I have been cold a long, long time'. (11)

The representation of violence marred by the broken promises and the metamorphosis of sentiment runs throughout *The Country Without a Post Office*. Violence and political uncertainty after that 1987 watershed election have hit badly every nook and corner of Kashmir but still the people is optimistic that one day we will see the dawn of peace and prosperity. "If there is a paradise on earth, / It is this, it is this, it is this" (15). Even the poet is hopeful enough to fight against injustice. There are other poems which include this theme as well. In "*A Pastoral*," for instance, the poet writes:

We shall meet again, in Srinagar,
by the gates of the Villa of Peace,
our hands blossoming into fists
till the soldiers return the keys
and disappear. (A pastoral 1-5,)

In this poem, as the title propounds, fighting against injustice in Kashmir becomes the pastoral duty of the poet. A sense of abrogating ethnic violence would be through fight, and consequently it would lead Kashmir towards independence. Simultaneously however

Shahid Ali introduces several other themes as well. Among those include life in Srinagar, the importance of religion and the demanding nature of religious authorities. Ali's concern and nightmares in which he immersed himself till his last breath. It haunted him and he returned to it again and again, in his conversation and his poetry.

At a certain point I lost track of you.

You needed me. You needed to perfect me : ("Farewell," 25-26)

The poem 'farewell' is a shattering evocation of conflict. 'They make a desolation and call it peace'. There is no attempt to resolve the implacable anger that fuels such conflict- beyond a sense of bitter, bitter mourning. The poem ends with an unbearable wistful plea, 'if only you could have been mine-what wouldn't have been possible in this world?' The four poems anthologised in the second section of *The Country Without a Post Office* are significantly inflected with ethnic and religious discourses. This section contains four poems-- "*A Pastoral*," wherein the "prologue" is presented as a poem; "*The Country Without a Post Office*," the title poem; "*The Floating Post Office*," wherein the poet does not mourn the loss but expresses hope about the future; and "*The Correspondent*." While the first sentence of "*A Pastoral*" is from Irfan Hasan's letter- -"We shall meet again, in Srinagar", a phrase Ali quotes in "*The Blessed Word: A Prologue*" and dedicates it to Irfan Hasan, this poem is dedicated to Suvir Kaul.

I have tied knot

With green thread at Shah-e-Hamdan, to be

United only when the atrocities

Are stunned by your jeweled return, but no news

Escapes the curfew, nothing of your shadow,

And I' am back, five hundred miles, taking
off

My ice, the mountains granite again as I
see

Men coming from those Abodes of snow

With gods asleep like children in their
arms.

(*"I See Kashmir from New Delhi at
Midnight,"* 52-60)

Wearing green threads at the Sufi shrines
is an old practice which unites Hindu and
Muslims on one page and the poem assert
that the threads will not work anymore
because the divide and alienation so wide.

I will die, in autumn, in Kashmir,
and the shadowed routine of each vein
will almost be news, the blood censored,
for the Saffron Sun and the Times of Rain.
...

(*'The Last Saffron,'* 1-4)

It's stated that Ali has a sense of history
which is awful and painful but out of that
springs up a pleasant dream of warbling
future. Ali makes a beautiful use of myth,
metaphors and depicts landscape in such
way that they become mindscape which in

turn becomes memoryscape. Thus *The
Country Without a Post Office* has been
composed in response to the political
agitations and continuous curfews of the
1990's: "Where you leave home in the
morning, you never know if you will
return". In "The Blessed Word: A
prologue," the opening section of *The
Country Without a Post Office*, he writes:

Let me cry out in that void...I write on that
void: Kashmir, Kaschmir,
Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir.....?

Such a description would attract a
Freudian scholar to examine the origin and
nature of Ali's ethnic neurosis. In a
paragraph of merely forty two odd words,
Kashmir figures eighteen times. Gosh
remarks,

"Kashmir became a vortex of
images circling around a single
point of stillness: the idea of
death. In this figuring of his
homeland, he himself became one
of the images that were spinning
around the dark point of
stillness—both *shahid* and
shaheed, witness and martyr—his
destiny inextricably linked with
Kashmir's, each prefigured by the
other."

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